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From Pre-College Grads to Undergrads: Encouraging Full-Time Enrollment after Summer Programs

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Guest Perspective: *From Pre-College Grads to Undergrads: Encouraging Full-Time Enrollment after Summer Programs*



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ABSTRACT

This guest perspective argues that converting in-person summer pre-college program participants into matriculated, degree-seeking undergraduate students at that same institution is a multi-step process that involves: 1) strategic pre-college program recruitment, 2) a curated and well-rounded summer pre-college experience that is both academically rigorous and socially dynamic, and 3) continued and consistent post-program engagement. It also argues that summer pre-college programs should work intentionally with Admissions departments during pre- and post-program development to create the most effective recruiting and enrollment pipelines from pre-college to eventual matriculation.

Keywords: precollege, summer programs, high school, conversion, enrollment

High school students choose to attend in-person summer pre-college programs for a variety of reasons: to boost their resumes for their eventual college applications, to challenge themselves academically, or to test drive being more independent in a new environment. The majority of students who participate in for-credit and non-credit summer pre-college programs are rising juniors and seniors in high school, many of whom are actively preparing to attend college the following fall. For these students in particular, a summer pre-college program serves as an important dress

rehearsal for two key elements: 1) the major they might like to pursue, and 2) the type of college or university they can picture themselves attending.

Summer pre-college programs geared toward high school students can therefore provide a key recruiting opportunity for colleges and universities; the students who consider, apply to, and ultimately attend these programs are likely already familiar with, and perhaps already interested in attending, the school itself. A survey conducted by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers in 2018 found that 70% of the 451 schools surveyed either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that pre-college programs are an important part of the enrollment pipeline at their institution (AACRAO, 2018). However, that same survey also uncovered that three-quarters of the institutions who participated reported that less than 24% of their 2017 undergraduate applicants had participated in a summer pre-college program, let alone one at the institution(s) to which they were applying (AACRAO, 2018).

Arguably, converting summer pre-college program participants into matriculated,



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degree-seeking undergraduate students at that same institution is a multi-step process that involves: 1) strategic pre-college program recruitment, 2) a curated and well-rounded summer pre-college experience that is both academically rigorous and socially dynamic, and 3) continued and consistent post-program engagement. Such factors not only attract students to apply to and participate in your institution's summer pre-college program in the first place, but they can also convert students who may have applied to your institution's summer program for general reasons such as cost or timeframe to strongly consider, and ultimately attend, your institution for their undergraduate degree.

Strategic Recruiting

Many different factors influence which in-person summer pre-college program(s) high school students apply to including: the school's location, the cost and length of the program, the program offerings, if the program is credit-bearing or not, and if residential and commuter options are available, among others. Your institution's campus style also likely plays a large role for many pre-college program applicants considering a four-year degree. Students looking for a particular type of undergraduate experience – at larger vs. smaller institutions, schools nearby vs. cross-country, as well as schools with specific degree offerings, facilities, and/or academic or social support services – may be drawn to your pre-college program to experience these elements on a trial basis, whether or not they are strongly

considering applying to or attending your school as an undergrad.

With hundreds of summer pre-college programs for high school students to choose from, ensuring the application and deposit process for your school's program is straightforward and personalized will help attract a larger number of applicants. Simple tweaks such as opening your applications as early as possible in the fall semester (i.e. October-November) and closing applications as late as possible in the late spring or early summer (i.e. May-June) allows the widest net to be cast. Implementing a quick turnaround from acceptance to required deposit encourages accepted students to "lock-in" with your summer program as opposed to weighing their options elsewhere.

Personalized outreach in the form of a phone call or an individual email to an accepted applicant and their parent(s) from the pre-college program director can result in an accepted applicant's positive association with the institution and incentivize them to commit. Lastly, being hyper-accessible and forthcoming about your summer pre-college program with those who are considering applying or who have been accepted via offering tailored campus tours, connecting families with relevant faculty, departments, and support services, sharing past course syllabi and schedules and/or hosting monthly virtual information sessions can also be highly effective enrollment tactics.

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Further, although fewer than one-third of pre-college programs report through admissions and recruiting, colleges and universities would do well to work in tandem with their admissions departments to plan summer pre-college program offerings and develop recruitment strategies that are in line with their institution's degree programs and that are responsive to feedback from prospective students (AACRAO, 2018). What majors are on the rise, both nationally and at your institution? What unique courses, resources, and characteristics does your school have that your pre-college program can showcase? If your institution lacks a particular degree program, what kinds of articulations and affiliations are in place with other institutions that can provide access to those post-graduate pathways so that students can still attend your school and achieve their desired degree or other professional certification(s)? Your summer pre-college program curriculum should highlight these opportunities, allowing high school students to learn about their course subject material and also the unique resources your institution has, more broadly, to help them picture themselves within a particular major track and the value of doing so at your institution as opposed to elsewhere.

A Dynamic Summer Pre-College Program Experience

Ensuring that the pre-college program itself is an educational and enjoyable experience is the second step in converting a summer pre-college student into a matriculated degree-

seeking student in the near future. In addition to working with faculty members to develop pre-college program courses and academic offerings that are appropriately challenging and engaging for high school students, the program should also complement this with easy access to additional academic support. Pre-college program students who are privy to the kinds of academic support that fully matriculated students would have access to such as a writing center, [group] study spaces equipped with smart boards or other collaborative learning technology, and faculty and teaching assistant office hours encourages those students to have the mindset of an undergraduate enrolled during the regular semester as opposed to a high school student participating in a summer program.

When it comes to conversion, however, the social elements of the summer pre-college program are key. Though the summer months are often quieter for most institutions, strategically hosting your summer pre-college program during the week(s) of the summer that are busiest with other groups and events can help the high school students participating picture themselves on your campus in the bustling fall and spring semesters as a full-time student. At my own institution, I have found that summer pre-college students are just as interested, if not more interested, in the University's facilities for recreation and dining, as well as the community surrounding the campus, as they are in their pre-college program course. Off-campus trips to nearby New York City for a

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Broadway show or to see a baseball game, as well as shuttles to the downtown area adjacent to the University, help students see how a college student is also part of a campus community and the surrounding area.

Additionally, institutions interested in increasing their rates of conversion can and should capitalize on the typically involved presence of parents and guardians during the pre-college program experience, as high school students often rely on their parents and guardians to help choose which schools to apply to, attend, and, oftentimes, help fund their undergraduate degree. While less than half of the pre-college programs surveyed by AARCAO in 2018 included an admissions presentation, institutions who incorporate elements such as campus tours of new and relevant facilities for specific programs and majors, as well as presentations with the offices of admissions and financial aid, at program orientation and closing create a natural link between pre-college and eventual matriculation (AACRAO, 2018). Invitations to executive leadership and college deans to these events are also excellent ways to engage summer pre-college students and parents while they are already on campus and are a captive audience. Lastly, all summer pre-college programs should not allow their high school students to say farewell without having them complete an exit evaluation with specific questions related to conversion (i.e. “How likely were you to apply to X University prior to your summer pre-college program experience? How likely are you to apply now?”).


Continued (and Consistent) Post-Program Engagement

A student’s completion of a summer pre-college program is hopefully just the beginning of their relationship with that institution if a tactical follow-up plan for continued engagement is implemented. This follow-up should be highly curated and remind your pre-college program “graduates” that their past participation in your program gives them a uniquely informed head start on the path to an undergraduate degree at your school. Post-program scholarships and financial aid in the form of application fee waivers and automatically awarded pre-college “alumni” scholarships are simple and effective ways to encourage students to apply and/or matriculate. At Adelphi, we recently created a past participant communication plan for former pre-college students who are current seniors, as well as for their parents and guardians. These communications come from myself, as the program director, and are more personalized than the general emails from our Admissions department, reminding these students of the fee waiver and scholarship opportunities reserved for them and offering to connect them with our faculty and advising services. For summer pre-college program alumni who are not yet seniors in high school, staying in touch to remind them of other summer and regular semester opportunities that apply to them including summer research opportunities, weekend enrichment programs, and course auditing are simple ways to maintain and grow your relationship.

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Using the tactics above over the past two summers since Adelphi has returned to an in-person summer pre-college program model, post-pandemic, has yielded impactful results. After summer 2022, 63% of the rising seniors who participated in the summer pre-college program applied to Adelphi the following fall (39 out of 62 eligible students). Of those students who applied, we saw approximately 25% of them matriculate (10 out of 39 students), with 90% of those students enrolling with the same major as what they studied during their summer pre-college program (9 out of 10 students).

Conclusion

Conversion is a multi-step process that requires strategic involvement of pre-college program directors and admissions departments before, during, and after a summer pre-college program takes place. Regardless of where your institution's summer pre-college program is housed, working with admissions departments regularly to tailor and update your summer pre-college offerings can keep them relevant with trending topics and careers, while also staying true to your institution's academic abilities and limitations. Creating a summer pre-college program experience that has a variety of academic offerings, session dates, and price points is the first step to attracting students and parents to your program; allowing the relationship to grow after the program concludes can help convert your pre-college grads to undergrads. 

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